

RUNNING of A MUDLARK

By Curran
Richard Greenley

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"Mudlark" Jim resented the derisive title and was filled with a longing to fall upon and rend the line of grinning stable boys who yelled and booted 'as Joe led Barehanks out for his exercise. The shabby blanket flapped around the gaunt legs, and the bald Roman nose was stretched to its farthest as Barehanks sniffed at the wet morning. Out in the east a rim of sickly yellow barred the sky. Jim scrambled up, and they went slowly out on the track to the accompaniment of "Hayrack" "Ki-yi! Get on to de moonshing tru his ribs!" "Three legged skate!" and a chorus of groans.

Jim's thin little arms went around the bony neck, while a tear trickled a white line down the grime on his cheek. The keen wind cut through the lad's jacket, and the little hands that gripped the bridle were blue with cold. Underneath the track was already sticky. As Jim turned into the field, where later the little red flag would mark the course from one ugly ditch to another, Barehanks laid down to his work. The slippery turf slid away from under his great hoofs in a green glimmer as they rose from hurdle to hurdle.

Over and over the course went Barehanks and Jim, while at the stables, in the doorway of Mayer Bros. quarters, a man stood peering through field glasses at the brown blur that swept around the field.

Jim slipped to the ground, the sweat pouring from horse and boy alike. Joe, his sulky face hid under the peak of his cap, gave him a sly glance as he blanketed the horse and led him inside. Jim turned with a question in his eyes to the man who stood pulling his gray mustache and looking away into space. Jim twitched his sleeve, and he looked down into the small, pinched face, its very eagerness rendering it thinner and more pathetic, and answered the unspoken query.

"Yes; he'll do. In for a penny, in for a pound; but if he fails I'll see that you get back to the old farm, all right."

"And him?" Jim pointed to where the bony nose showed through the open door.

The man laughed shortly. "A bullet through his ugly head." The boy shrank back and slipped through the door. Unperceived, he curled down in the straw almost at the feet of Barehanks, who munched contentedly at his provender.

Other eyes had watched that morning gallop. Joe, the groom, had finished the rubbing down when, with an eye on the silent figure outside the door, he snatched from his nail the bridle that Barehanks must wear in the coming race, drew a bottle of colorless liquid from his pocket and poured a few drops over the bit. Bright eyes watched from the shadow of the feed box, and when Joe, his work done, disappeared Jim jerked the bridle down and smelled it. There was not the slightest scent. He hung the bridle back again and resumed his place between the horse's legs, a look of evilish gravity on the queer, puckered, old young face.

The hours wore on. Over on the track, where a drizzling rain fell steadily, men went up and down in mackintoshes. Women in short skirts gathered in knots upon the grand stand, their eyes fever bright with excitement. The crowd grew steadily. Out there, where the little red flag, like points of flame, marked the zigzag of the hurdles, the old wagon drawn by the gray work horse stood loaded with the net, and a scurry of boys blew hither and thither in the wake of the different owners.

There had been wild work when Joe essayed to lead Barehanks out. An old rope halter hung where the bridle should have been. Joe turned ashy. Jim stuck like a bar to Barehanks and trailed at his heels in his patched and stained jacket, a mere apology for owner's colors. Neither horse, owner nor jockey was a favorite on the Downs. True to the primal instinct, the rout was hostile to the shabby entourage. Nevertheless there was no open affront. Landon evidently possessed some kind of a pull with Mayer Bros.; hence his occupancy of one of their stalls and the grudging attendance of Joe.

Jim was ready to mount Barehanks when the bell tapped, but as he passed the grand stand, still clinging to the old rope halter, the crowd yelled and rose as a man.

Off with the saddle and the weighing done, they were mounted again and filed before the grand stand. Barehanks' ugly head reared above his fellows. Then as they would have passed into the field a voice from the judges' stand halted them: "What's the matter with that boy on No. 5? That's no bridle. Where'd he get that halter?"

All eyes turned on Jim, who wheeled Barehanks and rode to the front of the judges' stand, while up in the front row a man shook his fist at him and cursed savagely. The small figure straightened in the saddle and, with an appealing glance at the wall of faces, pulled a bridle, bit and all, from the breast of his jacket. An intense silence fell as the childish, treble rang out: "Boss, here's the bridle right enough, but I'd ride him with nothin' but a rope halter to Jericho before I'd let it go in his mouth. You can't smell nothin' on you can't see nothin'. But I was settin' down in the corner on a sayin' nothin' when that black devil poured somethin' out of a bottle all over it, on when he was gone I just up and wiped it, on I ain't let go of it since. You can see for yourself."

And with a sure aim he bunched the bridle and flung it to the judge.

At the lad's first word there had been a commotion down there among the crowd of grooms in the paddock. A little, black form darted across the course and made for the outer gate. A dozen men seized him at once and then held their breath for the next move in the play.

Old Colonel Cantwell, the judge, stood up and waved for silence. "Bring him another bridle. I'll take care of this one. Now get to the post."

Jim settled in the saddle. Ahead of him the little flags danced in the wind and rain. Garrison's Black Seraph wheeled into Barehanks, and at the end of the line Morgan's Timber Wolf plunged and reared. Three times the red flag fell, three times they struggled back to the post. Then red down, yellow down and a whirl of black, bay sorrel and gray swept away, nose and nose, with the rain drip on flesh of scarlet and blaze of gold.

"Mudlark!" "Old Skate!" It rang in his ears on the whistle of the wind. The first hurdle—Jim felt the long body gather itself, and they were over, leaving the Black Seraph a bulk adrift in the field. Timber Wolf led by a head. There were only four now. Jim grinned and lunched a little for ward as Barehanks' great hoofs gripped the slippery grass. Grant's Berrydown was second, the long stride of English hunters showing its mottle from great-grand sire to son, Maxton's Red Ruin and Long's Wild Irishman nose and nose with Barehanks. Up the slope and over the second hurdle, the great shoulders working with a mighty come and go, Barehanks forged on, while the Wild Irishman dropped in a heap to scramble out with a wrenched fore leg. Jim laughed aloud as they swept the turn. The third—he had studied it well and knew the rotten bank, where the Timber Wolf landed, struggled a moment and slid down, his fore legs fighting the air. They were close together now, Derry down first by a shoulder length, Barehanks next, his ugly, lean head stretched out, with red nostrils wide aflare, and Red Ruin straggling a sorry third.

Over—over again. They had made the round once and for the second time had passed the first three hurdles. Barehanks crept up a few inches on the home stretch, leaving Red Ruin a dozen yards in the rear. The last hurdle lay before them, orange and black-thorn, with an ugly stretch of water beyond. Jim's tense little hands crept up closer to the bit as he poured God knows what prayers and promises into the two ears that lay to the big, ugly head. He felt the great muscles stiffen, the bunching of those awkward looking legs, the surge of the heart beneath the gaunt ribs—up—over—flash—whir—and the sea of faces rose and surged in the billow of sound as the bald Roman nose was thrust under the wire, winner by a neck's length.

From the stand above men came down hand over hand, men poured in from the pit, and the shrill clamor of excited women's voices shrilled above the dull roar of the crowd. Jim slid from the saddle and went to the block, staggering under its weight, his slender body all a-quiver, then back to sit motionless, enduring, until the moment when Barehanks, swathed in his shabby blanket, stood the center of the stables' attention and envy, and he awoke and lived again, his arms around the brown neck, his face buried in the scanty mane. There could be no question of a bullet in the head of the winner of the Montgomery steeplechase.

Gladdening a Humorist.

The financial burden which Mark Twain carried some years ago weighed on his mind heavily. In these moments of despondency there was one tactful friend who could make the humorist forget his troubles. This was Dan Beard, the artist, who illustrated some of Twain's books.

"Dan Beard, there is no tonic that can equal the company of a cheerful man," said the humorist as he entered the artist's studio.

"Ah, but I have such a pleasant subject to work upon that I am not in need of either man or tonic for my cheerfulness," retorted the artist.

"Beg pardon, it is I that need the tonic, and that is why I am here," said Twain forlornly.

"Then allow me to prescribe a dose of your own medicine." And Mark was handed a copy of his book which Beard had been studying.

"I thank you," replied the humorist. "It took me a year to get that medicine out of my system, and I do not propose to imbibe it again."

A discussion of the book was followed by a hearty dinner, and Twain left his friend, having received the cheer that he needed.

He Obeyed Orders.

Old world domestics make the best possible servants because they work like machines, never forgetting an order and doing exactly as they are told, without presuming to think for themselves. But once in awhile this literal adherence to duty produces some awkward results. An American woman living in India, with native servants, once told her butler to see that there was always a napkin at the bottom of the fruit dish, cake basket, etc., when these were brought to the table.

The napkin was thereafter always seen in its place. But one day a tureen of vegetable soup was served, and the hostess began to wield the long, old fashioned silver ladle about in it. Something very like a fringed rag made its appearance in the first plateful. The butler was summoned to remove the dish. "It cannot be that the mem sahib found no napkin at the bottom," he hazarded, much distressed because of this unexplained disapproval, "for I myself placed there the largest one I could find."

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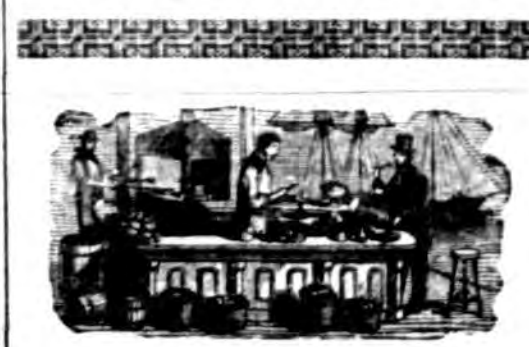
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